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ABSTRACT

The educational assessment movement holds considerable promise for encouraging college faculty to exercise collective responsibility to improve the quality of learning. Current efforts toward improving higher education include the Association of American Colleges' report, "Integrity in the College Curriculum"; William J. Bennett's report, "To Reclaim a Legacy"; and the comprehensive assessment program in use at Alverno College. A college's assessment program should focus on programs and courses as well as on student achievement, and should provide a variety of kinds of feedback. The program should be designed and administered by the faculty, cooperating with outside resources such as standardized tests or outside examiners. Assessment extends beyond testing and enables the student to use and apply knowledge in a range of exercises designed to demonstrate intellectual growth and versatility. A testing program should not rely solely on externally imposed minimum competency tests; rather, each institution should design its programs and courses according to what is important at that institution. (GDC)

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The Why, What, and Who of Assessment: The College Perspective

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The Why, What, and Who of Assessment: The College Perspective

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The subject of assessment came to the fore in American higher education just two years ago when three major national reports on the quality of undergraduate education, appearing in quick succession, made it a major theme. The initial reaction of many presidents, deans, and professors was to dismiss assessment as the latest educational buzz word, with the expectation that it would go away quickly. When it became clear that assessment was not a passing fad, many persons in higher education tried to come to terms with it by claiming, perhaps somewhat defensively, that assessment was already a major part of what they did, and they wondered aloud what the fuss was all about. They pointed to their evaluation of student performance through tests, examinations, laboratory exercises, classroom discussions, and paper assignments. Faculty members cited the evaluations of their own performance by their departments, their students, and by faculty committees on appointments and promotions. This defensive reaction is still commonplace, but it is giving way gradually to a fuller understanding of assessment as it is practiced in industrial and military settings and in a few educational institutions where it receives special emphasis. This growing understanding of assessment is stimulating widespread interest in its potential for producing better students, better teachers, better courses, and better programs. The question is no longer *whether*, but *how*.

Much of the initial negative reaction to assessment was caused by the hoopla that surrounded its emergence as a major item on the agenda for the reform of undergraduate education. Many faculty members initially saw assessment as a threat because they were made to feel that it contained sacramental mysteries to which they were not privy and also because they saw assessment as a new set of demands being imposed upon them from without—from governors, legislatures, accrediting

associations, and from the administrations at their own institutions. They saw it as a threat to their freedom to run their courses as they saw fit and with no outside interference.

American higher education is distinctive and even unique in the degree of autonomy enjoyed by individual institutions. They make their own decisions about who is admitted, who teaches, how much faculty members are paid, and what students must do to graduate. The faculty, as the core of the university, cherishes its own special freedom, and the typical individual faculty member is vigilant against interference from outside the university as well as from non-academic components within the university.

The benign anarchy of the modern American university also has a student component. Some twenty years ago the curricular pendulum moved rapidly away from required courses towards greater elective freedom, thus giving students a larger measure of the kind of self-determination that their teachers enjoyed.

The major national reports on the improvement of undergraduate education, and especially the report of the Association of American Colleges entitled *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, charge that curricular incoherence is the result largely of the radical freedom of faculty members to teach what they like with little reference to the needs of students. And it is that alleged incoherence that the national reports are addressing. In the case of William J. Bennett's report, *To Reclaim a Legacy*, the prescription for restoring coherence, at least in the area of the humanities, is a core curriculum based upon the intellectual tradition of the Western world. The report by the Association of American Colleges, by contrast, proposes a scheme of order and purpose that is informed by nine intellectual, aesthetic, and philosophic experiences that nurture the characteristics of the liberally educated person. The AAC list of essential educational experiences and skills includes such items as inquiry and critical analysis; literacy, which embraces writing, reading, speaking, and listening; understanding numerical data; historical consciousness; scientific understanding; sensitivity to values; and aesthetic awareness.

Whether one uses the curricular model of Secretary Bennett, the curricular goals of the AAC report, or some other curricular rationale and design, assessment refers to the various procedures that are used to determine the extent to which individual students have met the curricular goals, mastered the prescribed subject matter, and acquired the skills and characteristics that certify them as having the essential marks of an educated person.

Assessment includes more than measuring the student's performance in reproducing or recognizing discrete items of information. Assessment focuses above all on exercises in which a student makes use of knowledge in new and imaginative ways to solve problems, raise fresh questions, and provide new insight. The highest educational achievement is literacy in the broad and deep sense in which the *Integrity* report defines it. No assessment scheme that relies excessively upon multiple-choice and short-answer tests is likely to lead to growth in students' literacy. A well-designed assessment program charts a student's growth in the grasp of the information and concepts in particular courses and programs. A successful assessment program provides feedback to both students and faculty so that both parties can judge their performance and make the necessary adjustments in their strategies and tactics as teachers and learners.

Alverno College is frequently cited as an institution—and perhaps it is the only institution—with a comprehensive assessment program that embraces all departments and programs and that stretches over the student's four years. Alverno students must demonstrate eight critical abilities, as they progress through six levels of performance in each of the eight abilities. In this educational slalom race, the student must make her way through more than 100 assessment gates.

Alverno's assessment program contains great merit, and dozens of institutions have taken valuable lessons from it. Alverno is remarkable in the degree of faculty collegiality and commitment that lie behind its assessment program. Still, very few colleges and universities are ready for a comprehensive program with a uniform methodology that stretches across all disciplines and programs. What they are much more ready for is a program that centers in individual academic departments and that focuses on the learning of students in the major field. Hence, most of the comments that follow refer to departmental faculties and programs.

The assessment movement holds considerable promise for encouraging faculties to exercise collective responsibility and to approach their educational tasks with a collegial mind-set. The department can be an especially effective unit for collective and collegial efforts to improve the quality of learning. The AAC *Integrity* report, in one of its strongest indictments of undergraduate education, charges that departmental major programs characteristically emphasize the number of courses required for a major but usually provide little or no rationale for the major and no compelling statement of the goals of the major. Consequently, the student is left to choose a specified number of courses from a large list but

is provided with little or no sense of the goals of the major and has little awareness of the particular knowledge and skills that one who majors in the field will possess. It is the *collective* responsibility of faculty members in specific departments to determine the goals of the major, design the courses and course sequences that will meet those goals, and devise exercises that will determine the extent to which major students are meeting the goals.

My sense is that in the past 25 years there has been a substantial decline in the influence and efficacy of the department as the locus of collaborative faculty work in the design and assessment of courses and programs. This decline is partly the result of the growing importance, in many institutions, of centers, institutes, and interdisciplinary programs. But the more fundamental change has been in the direction of greater individual faculty responsibility for designing courses and syllabi, and making and grading rests and examinations. Again, I have no statistical evidence, but my impression is that there are fewer team-taught courses now than formerly. In the natural sciences it is not uncommon to find a pyramidal structuring of the curriculum, with a logical progression from simple to more complex subject matter. But in the social sciences and humanities there has been a demise of introductory courses that serve as the prerequisites to advanced courses and which involve the collaboration of teams of faculty. Perhaps a single introductory course does not make sense in some disciplines and in some institutions. But I believe that departmental faculties should carefully discuss and examine that issue, along with the larger issue of the overall rationale for the list of courses offered and the relationships among those courses.

It is important to emphasize that assessment is not to be equated with testing and examinations. Tests and examinations are, however, important components of an assessment system. In the past quarter century there has been a substantial decline in the number of final examinations in courses, and comprehensive examinations are about as rare as the California condor. A well-constructed mid-term examination or final examination can be a valuable educational tool. It can provide essential feedback to both instructors and students. The review for such examinations can enable students to gain a comprehensive understanding of a course or a subject field and help them see relationships among the various elements of courses. As I recall my own teaching career, I believe that some of the most valuable investments of my time came when my colleagues and I spent long hours designing questions and exercises for final examinations in the introductory course and for the comprehensive departmental

examination, back before that examination was abandoned. Working together on those examinations compelled us to review the purposes and goals of particular courses and to consider the rationale of the overall structure of the departmental curriculum. Furthermore, those conversations were extremely valuable for young members of the department who were still making the transition from graduate student to full-time teacher.

One of the criticisms of American higher education is that the responsibility for instruction and for assessing student performance is vested in the same person, an arrangement that is contrary to practices in almost every other country. This practice confers enormous freedom and authority upon the American college professor. The model that prevails almost everywhere else in the world certifies the student on the basis of performance on examinations that are designed and graded by agencies and individuals who have had nothing to do with instructing the students. In recent years we have begun to see some modest movement in that direction in the American higher education scene. In a growing number of states, led by Florida and Tennessee, standardized tests are being used to determine not only which students are admitted to college but also which ones are admitted to advanced status and which ones are certified for graduation. The use of standardized tests holds great promise for elevating minimum standards of student performance. But if standardized tests assume too prominent a role in an institution, they can have a stultifying effect on teaching and learning. Such tests are not well suited for permitting a student to demonstrate his or her capacity for aesthetic judgment, critical thinking, moral sensibility, and other more subtle and elusive qualities of mind and character. Standardized tests do not permit students to demonstrate that they are literate in a meaningful sense. The best way to assess a student's learning and development, especially in the more advanced levels of the undergraduate experience, is through well-designed essay examinations, papers that are discussed before and after they are written, and well-run classroom discussions.

If assessment is to result in significant and lasting improvement in student achievement, assessment programs must remain under the control of faculties and not be imposed by legislatures and other external authorities. But to be credible and effective in the exercise of their responsibility for assessment, it is imperative that faculty members surrender some of their individual autonomy and work collaboratively. A modest step in that direction would be for faculty colleagues, both within and outside the same department, to work together in designing and grading one another's exams and in conducting oral examinations.

Another step could involve the use of examiners from outside the institution. Swarthmore College has used outside examiners in its honors programs since 1922, and the commitment there remains very strong. Wesleyan University uses outside examiners in its College of Letters and College of Social Sciences programs. The use of outside examiners is a long and strong tradition among the British universities.

In an attempt to promote more extensive experimentation with outside examiners, the Association of American Colleges is in the beginning stages of a program that is funded by a FIPSE grant. The AAC program will involve 18 colleges and universities grouped into six clusters of three each. Each cluster will contain three institutions of comparable size and character located in the same geographical region. Those three institutions will swap faculty examiners who will attempt to assess the level and quality of preparation of seniors in the major field. The experimental program will involve three disciplines in each institution. The senior majors will be examined by a team made up of faculty members from the other two institutions in the partnership. The form of the examinations, which will include both witten and oral components, will be determined by the examining teams in consultation with the departmental faculty members at the institutions in which the students are being examined. The use of the examination results will be determined by the home institution. The examination grade may appear as a separate item on the transcript. It may be used as a component in an honors grade or in a senior capstone course, if there is one. That question will be answered by each institution in its own way. What I wish to emphasize is that within the general structure of the program there is faculty control over the process and the substance of the exams. Our hope is that at the end of the three-year program, the participating institutions will have found enough value in the experiment to continue the program at their own expense, which should be relatively modest. We hope also, of course, that the success of the experiment will lead other institutions to adopt the same model. We believe that it holds great promise for improving the quality of learning, especially in the major.

While I have emphasized that departments should become more vital centers of collective responsibility for the quality of what is taught and learned, the collegial approach to these matters should also take forms that transcend departmental boundaries. I am encouraged by the increasing number of faculty workshops on specific educational questions. The improvement of student writing has become a goal for many institutions, and faculty workshops on writing have enlarged the capacity of faculty

members in all disciplinary fields to teach students to write better.

Faculty workshops and conferences that deal with teaching have also become more commonplace in recent years, and with good results. Few institutions have the resources to establish anything comparable to Harvard's Danforth Center, which provides an array of aids and services to faculty members who wish to become better teachers. But every college and university can call upon the experience and insight of its best teachers, almost all of whom are eager to tutor their younger and less skilled colleagues in designing and running courses and in developing methods for letting students use and demonstrate what they have learned. Presidents and deans demonstrate their commitment to teaching workshops by providing the resources and recognition that will encourage widespread participation.

What is encouraging about the assessment movement is that it is leading to promising developments in many different kinds of institutions. Alverno College, as I have previously noted, provides an exemplary model for assessing the growth of students in eight critical abilities over a period of time. Northeast Missouri State University, has, for the past dozen years, provided an instructive model of the "value added" approach to assessing higher education with the use of pre- and post-tests. The COFHE group of institutions, consisting of some of the nation's most prestigious research universities and liberal arts colleges, are giving careful and collective consideration to assessment. President Bok of Harvard has provided leadership among the COFHE group, and in his most recent annual report focuses in an exceptionally thoughtful way on the subject of assessment. He also addresses the assessment issue in his new book, *The Higher Learning*. Professor Richard Light of the Harvard faculty is conducting a seminar for members of the Harvard faculty and faculty members from other universities that is focusing on assessment in the context of relevant educational research findings. This is a badly needed emphasis, which points to the fact that very few college and university faculty members consult the relevant findings of learning theory and pedagogical research in designing and teaching their courses.

In summary, I wish to emphasize these points:

1. Assessment is not an end in itself but is, rather, a means to improving programs and achievement in learning.

2. A well-designed assessment program focuses upon the soundness and success of programs and courses fully as much as it emphasizes the progress of individual students. A successful assessment program

provides a variety of kinds of feedback to students, faculty members, and academic officers.

3. Assessment programs should be localized. That is, they should be geared to the goals of the particular institution, program, department, or course.

4. To be successful, an assessment program must be designed and run by faculty members, working collaboratively, with the use of outside resources (national standardized tests, outside examiners) that are relevant and useful.

5. While assessment usually involves testing, it is not to be equated with testing. Assessment of an individual student's learning goes beyond passive recall or recognition of particular items of information; it enables the student to use and apply knowledge in a range of exercises designed to demonstrate intellectual growth and versatility.

6. While minimum-competency testing may help to elevate threshold standards, the widespread use of standardized tests, especially when mandated by external authority, is a risky and unpromising means of improving the quality of programs and the overall educational achievement of students. Externally imposed assessment implicitly denigrates the role and authority of teachers; it can encourage them to design programs and courses to meet the norms of general tests rather than the higher learning they believe is most important. Over time, those trends would lead to institutional sameness and blandness.

The greatness of American higher education is its diversity, ingeniously developed by enterprising and imaginative professors, presidents, and deans to educate an enormous range of types of students and meet many different public needs. Constraining the freedom of faculty members and academic administrators to design programs that best meet the needs of their particular students would be a backward step for American higher education.

We are in the early stages of the assessment movement. It has some pitfalls, but the promise far outweighs the perils.